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ABSTRACT

Too often books have been published with contrived and unnatural nonsexist messages. Teachers searching for good nonsexist literature need to consider the potential contributions of biographies, especially women's biographies, written for young children's listening and reading enjoyment. Women in well-selected biographies are assertive, independent, achievement-oriented, and adventurous--women who have made significant contributions to their society. As children vicariously experience the lives of these women, their stereotypes of women's roles can be replaced by more open and flexible concepts of these roles. The specific women's biographies will vary according to children's needs and interests. However, variety is essential to demonstrate what women have achieved in many areas and under various conditions. Among the good biographies to introduce to young children are "The Two Worlds of Beatrix Potter"; "Grandma Moses, Favorite Painter"; "Harriet and the Runaway Book"; "Jane Goodall"; "Maria Mitchell, Stargazer"; "Rosa Parks"; "Rose Kennedy"; and "Martha Berry." (HOD)

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EARLY EXPERIENCES WITH WOMEN'S BIOGRAPHIES

Sandra Styer

As teachers strive to alleviate the sexism in the primary grade curriculum, children's literature becomes a major focus. Even literature of very high quality in other respects is often sexist. In response to this situation, numerous books have been published with a very explicit nonsexist message. Often, these seem contrived and unnatural.

Teachers searching for good nonsexist literature need to consider the potential contributions of biographies written for young children's listening and reading enjoyment.

Early exposure to women's biographies has many benefits. It has been well documented that young children's concepts of sex-roles develop in the preschool years. By the primary grades these concepts are already well established. To challenge these stereotypes and promote more flexible concepts of sex-roles, biographical heroines can be quite helpful. Women in well selected biographies are not stereotyped. They are assertive, independent, achievement-oriented, adventurous women who have made significant contributions. They reflect varied interests and many-faceted personalities as they often successfully meet the dual challenges of homemaking and a demanding profession.

As children vicariously experience the lives of these women, their stereotypes of women's roles can be replaced by more open and flexible concepts of women's roles. Women's importance both

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in the history of our country and in the history of particular occupational fields is realistically portrayed in good biographies. If young children are exposed to women's biographies, it can be expected that this interest will continue as they read more advanced biographies of these and other women. They will have learned that reading women's biographies can be a satisfying and exciting experience. A bonus for young female readers who identify with these biographical heroines is the enhancement of their self-concepts. A young girl's perception of her own sex-role and her expectations of life can be modified.

The specific women's biographies to be introduced will vary according to the children's needs and interests. However, variety is essential to demonstrate that women have achieved in many areas and under various conditions. The following are but a few of the many good biographies for young children.

Universally, children know and love Peter Rabbit. They would be delighted to read Ann Margaret Mayer's The Two Worlds of Beatrix Potter and become acquainted with the first Peter Rabbit and other storybook characters who lived on her "Hill Top Farm." As children learned more about the background of these characters, they would be motivated to return to Beatrix Potter to read more stories and study her superb illustrations.

Charles Graves' Grandma Moses, Favorite Painter offers children the image of a successful, productive older woman. Much of her biography is a family story to which children could easily relate. Displaying some Grandma Moses prints in

the classroom could contribute to the development of art appreciation. The detail and warmth of these old-fashioned primitive paintings would attract young children. Enjoying her illustrations for The Night Before Christmas would be a special holiday treat.

In Harriet and the Runaway Book, Johanna Johnston portrays Harriet Beecher Stowe as a busy mother with six children who found the time to write Uncle Tom's Cabin, a novel which had an important influence upon people's feelings about slavery. In recognition of Lincoln's admiration of this woman, this book could be introduced when commemorating Lincoln's birthday. As Johnston also shares with the reader some of the limitations women faced in the nineteenth century, children could begin to understand the changing status and roles of women.

Young children may assume that scientists are men unless they are exposed to women models of scientific achievement. Two scientists of potential interest to young children are Jane Goodall, a contemporary woman who has studied chimpanzees in their natural environment and Maria Mitchell, a nineteenth century astronomer. Their biographies would enrich science or social studies units on animals and space.

In Jane Goodall, Eleanor Coerr described Jane as a child who was encouraged by her mother to bring home natural treasures such as birds' nests and insects. Her mother later accompanied her adult daughter to Africa's Lake Tanganyika to study a group of chimpanzees. Coerr's fascinating account of the animal behavior which Jane observed increases the value of this

biography as a source of science concepts and understandings.

Similarly, young children will acquire some basic concepts of astronomy in Katharine Wilkie's Maria Mitchell, Stargazer. Again, there is the portrayal of a young girl whose strong childhood interests predicted her adult profession. The process of making scientific discoveries begins to be clarified for children who read of Maria's discovery of a comet.

Women's Studies and Black Studies merge when children recognize the important contributions made by black women throughout American history. One generally unknown story is related to George Washington. This biography's heroine is thirteen year old Phoebe Fraunces, a free black child whose father owned the Queen's Head Taver a New York meeting place favored by Washington. Phoebe's father, who had heard a rumor of an attempt on Washington's life, sent Phoebe as a housekeeper and spy for Washington. This bright, insightful, and courageous child was able to prevent one of Washington's bodyguards from poisoning his food.

When children celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday, they should recognize the contributions of specific women to the achievement of King's goals. In Eloise Greenfield's Rosa Parks, children experience the strong determination of this black woman to be treated fairly. Martin Luther King actively supported her refusal to relinquish her bus seat leading to the landmark Supreme Court decision in her favor. Children can understand the role of Coretta Scott King not only as King's wife and the mother of his four children but also as an

exceptionally capable, energetic woman equally devoted to civil rights issues. Her extraordinary accomplishments both prior to and following her marriage make fascinating reading. Children will perceive her as a strong independent individual who continues to promote her late husband's ideals.

Another exceptional woman who achieved fame through her family is Rose Kennedy. Since she has always been an outspoken advocate of motherhood as a worthy occupation, she should be included to supplement the women who have combined a career with a family or who have had no family. In Rose Kennedy, Ann Hawkes portrays Rose Kennedy as a Boston Mayor's daughter who developed the skills which would later contribute to the political success of her husband and sons.

Children who read Mary Malone's biography of Helen Keller's teacher, Annie Sullivan, will have greater empathy with the handicapped. Annie's creative teaching methods, Helen's unusual learning ability, and their mutual commitment provide a portrayal of two strong women who refused to be defeated.

Another teacher is portrayed in Martha Berry, by Mary Kay Phelan. As a well educated girl from a wealthy Georgia family, Martha began her teaching career when she invited some little neighbor boys to join her as she read. From these first few boys to the establishment of a boys' boarding school and finally Berry College, she was a pioneer in education.

With the exciting new opportunities for girls in sports, biographies of successful women athletes will reinforce the idea that women belong in competitive athletics. Many sports

biographies are realistically illustrated with informative photographs. In one such biography, S.H. Burchard presents Chris Evert as a highly motivated, dedicated and satisfied tennis champion. Young children will especially relate to the story of Ms. Evert's early years.

As children are exposed to women's biographies, the teacher can stimulate critical thinking and responses through thoughtful discussion questions. These women's similarities and differences can be explored. Their career development can be analyzed. Personal and professional relationships can be examined. Women's biographies can provide a rich source of curricular materials about women which will partially compensate for the deficiency in other areas.

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